Dealing with death and disaster

Hendrik van der Veere

1. Questions

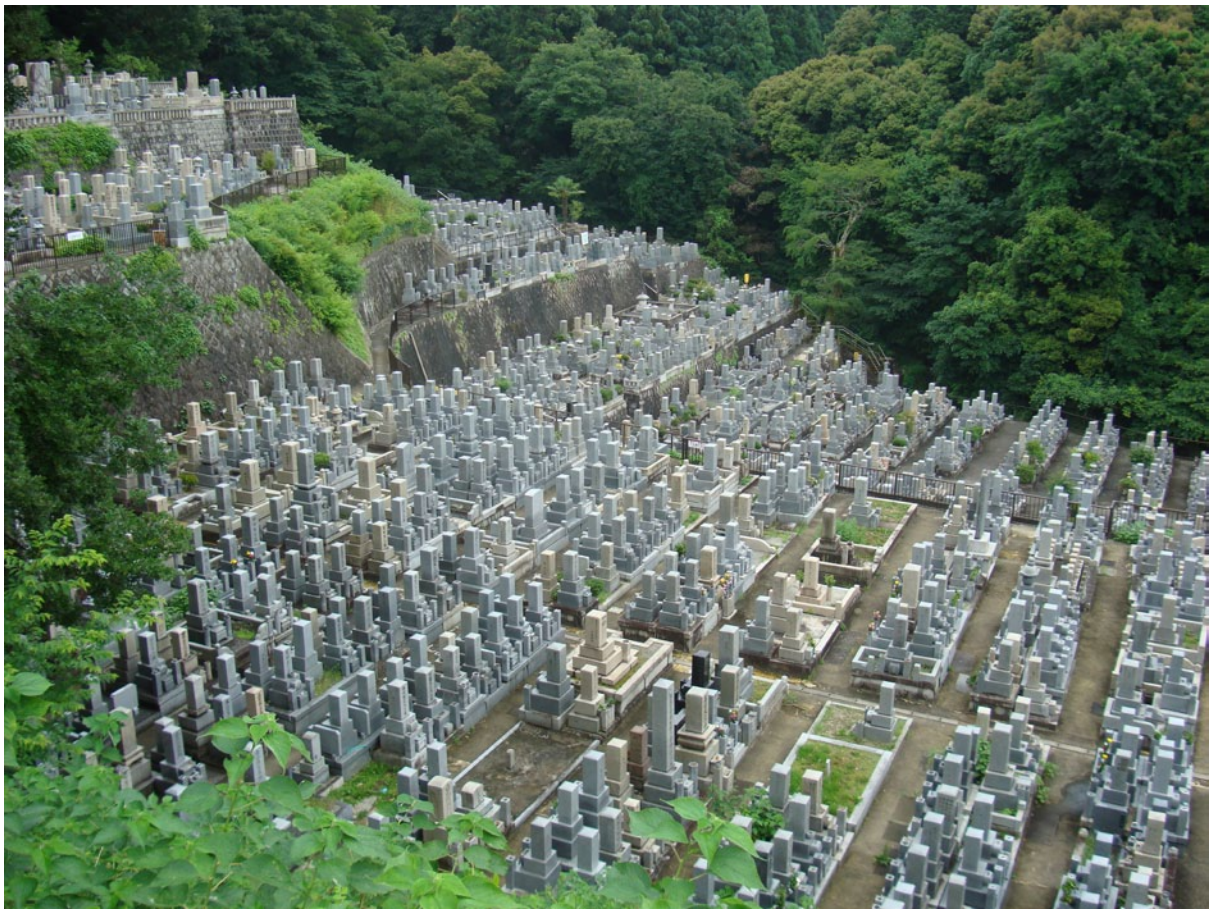
On September 11th of this year, 2011 (Heisei 23) remembrance services were held in numerous places. In the US and Europe media attention focussed on New York where thousands of people had lost their lives in terrorist attacks. On the same day, ceremonies were held in north-eastern Japan for those who had perished half a year earlier, on March 11th, in consequent disasters, of which the *tsunami* claimed more than 10.000 lives.

In discussions about the extent of the damage done to the economy and the social framework and about the ensuing relief efforts questions were raised concerning the role of religion and more specifically Buddhism in dealing with the aftermath of the disasters. The nature of some questions and the background from which these were posed made me realise two things. Firstly, questions about aid and relief were almost solely geared to material matters while the problem of mental assistance and comfort for the victims (dead or alive) was overlooked. Secondly, the functions ascribed to Buddhism within Japanese society, including its role in dealing with matters of loss and grief, appeared to me to be misunderstood by most non-Japanese. The first point may be a matter of choice, and for the second point one can say that this may be true not only for Buddhism but for other aspects of Japanese society as well. An evaluation or criticism, however, of the actions taken by Buddhist organisations, of the courses open to them, and of the responsibilities they have to shoulder, should be build on an adequate understanding of the place accorded to Buddhist rituals within the world-view of modern Japanese. In other words, the actions undertaken after the disaster must be seen against the backdrop of ritual patterns that are generally accepted.

In the following I want to describe this ritual background in general terms as I came to understand it through my studies and my work as a priest over the years. This description sketches a general image of the ritual functions Buddhist priests and temples carry out in Japanese society and touches upon some of the underlying suppositions of the place of Buddhism within the community. Thereafter, I will discuss some of the immaterial problems that surfaced in the aftermath of the disasters in order to bring to more general attention the psychological problems that are, as I remarked, overlooked in most if not all western publications.

2. The ritual background: dealing with the dead

Buddhism may boast of an incredibly large volume of texts produced over centuries of efforts. Some of these texts are devoted to speculation and doctrinal discussion, many texts concern practice and ritual. Western scholars initially explored this wealth of material in the assumption that Buddhism could be understood by studying its doctrine, which approach and perspective



Bochi *near a temple*

was copied by Japanese university employed scholars, thus creating their a field concerned with exegesis of doctrine. The central place that ritual and practice occupies in the Buddhist traditions of Japan was thereby relegated to the background. Doctrinal studies have no bearing on the actual ritual functions of Buddhism nor do they reflect the place Buddhism occupies in the world-view of ordinary Japanese.

In present-day, twenty-first century Japan most people will only interact with Buddhist matters through its ritual functions at ritually determined days. What is more, the direct incentive to contact a Buddhist temple is generally crisis-driven. A crisis may be loosely defined here as any deviation and anomaly in the expected course of one's life, from divorce or business failure, to mental or physical illness. Japanese ritual experts provide relief in any crisis through a number of methods ranging from counselling to the performance of rituals or the construction of talismans and amulets. Most importantly, Buddhist ritual specialists almost monopolize the services for the dead, such as the funerary rites and the cyclic remembrance-rituals.

In the absence of a crisis, funeral services and the set of rituals that follow constitute the nucleus of the contacts between family and temples. Although all the preparations for the actual funeral, including cremation etc, may be left to the funeral parlour, there is general agreement on an accepted ritual order in which the physical remains are "guided" by the priests. These priests chant sutras to guide the spirit, erect an altar, and organize the wake on the eve of the cremation (*tsuya*), hold a final farewell ceremony (*kokubetsu-shiki*) and so on. They also provide, on the day of cremation, the posthumous (Buddhist) name for the deceased and prepare the funerary tablet (*ihai*) on which this name is written. In many cases, the spirit of the deceased ritually becomes the disciple of the priest who on the one hand guides the spirit through the after-life and who on the other hand takes care of the remains of the body in this life. This intricate

connection between the caretakers of the dead and the spirits of the dead is visible in the fact that the grave-monuments (*haka*) are placed together in a yard (*bochi*) situated near temples or other spiritually rich places. The monuments themselves, under which the urns with the bones may be stored, are often stylized representations of the human body through geometrical forms following concepts from the Buddhist tradition.

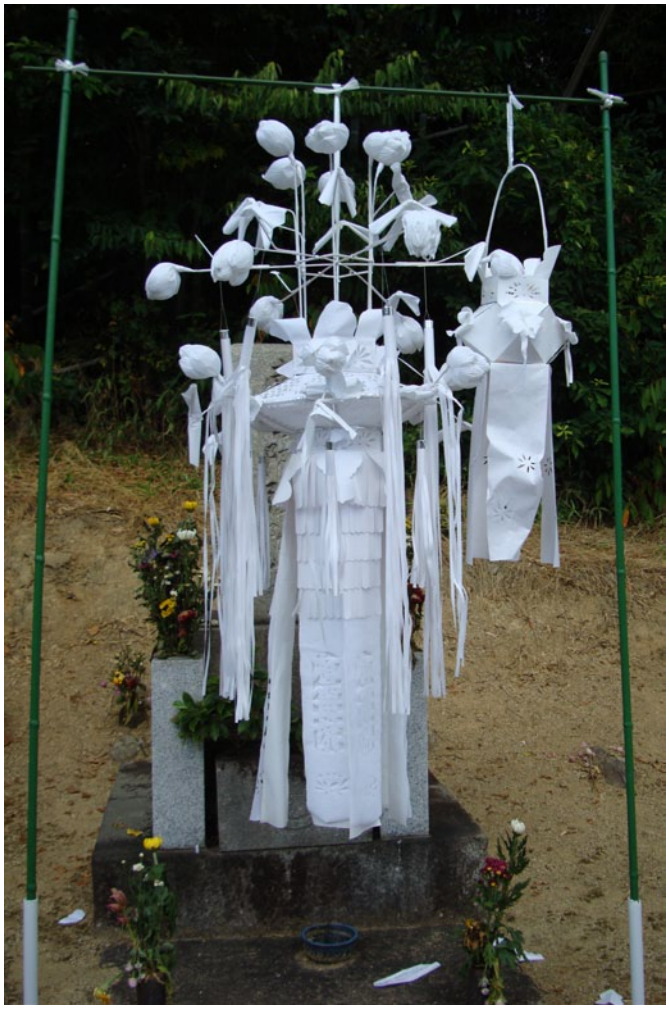
Haka *in the form of the body*

3. The ritual calendar: *higan* and Obon

The involvement of the family with the temples does not end with the funeral. Allowing for ritual differences between the various schools of Buddhism in the way the bodily remains and spirits are treated, there is on a more general level an awareness of a ritual calendar that should be followed. This ritual calendar counts a number of days in which ties between the living and the dearly departed are strengthened. The weeks around the spring and autumn equinox are two of these periods and are known as the periods of *higan*. *Higan* is a term of Buddhist provenance and was originally used to refer to the other shore of a river or sea. More specifically, the other shore was seen as the space that could be reached by Buddhist practice, and is variously described as the world of enlightenment, the level of insight and wisdom, the domain of 'transcendental' knowledge etc. Metaphorically, Buddhism was called the raft that enabled people to reach the other shore, crossing the sea of suffering. Often, this other shore was imagined as a place one could travel to horizontally, and not as a heaven above, which accounts for much of the imagery found in texts and rituals dealing with the other world.

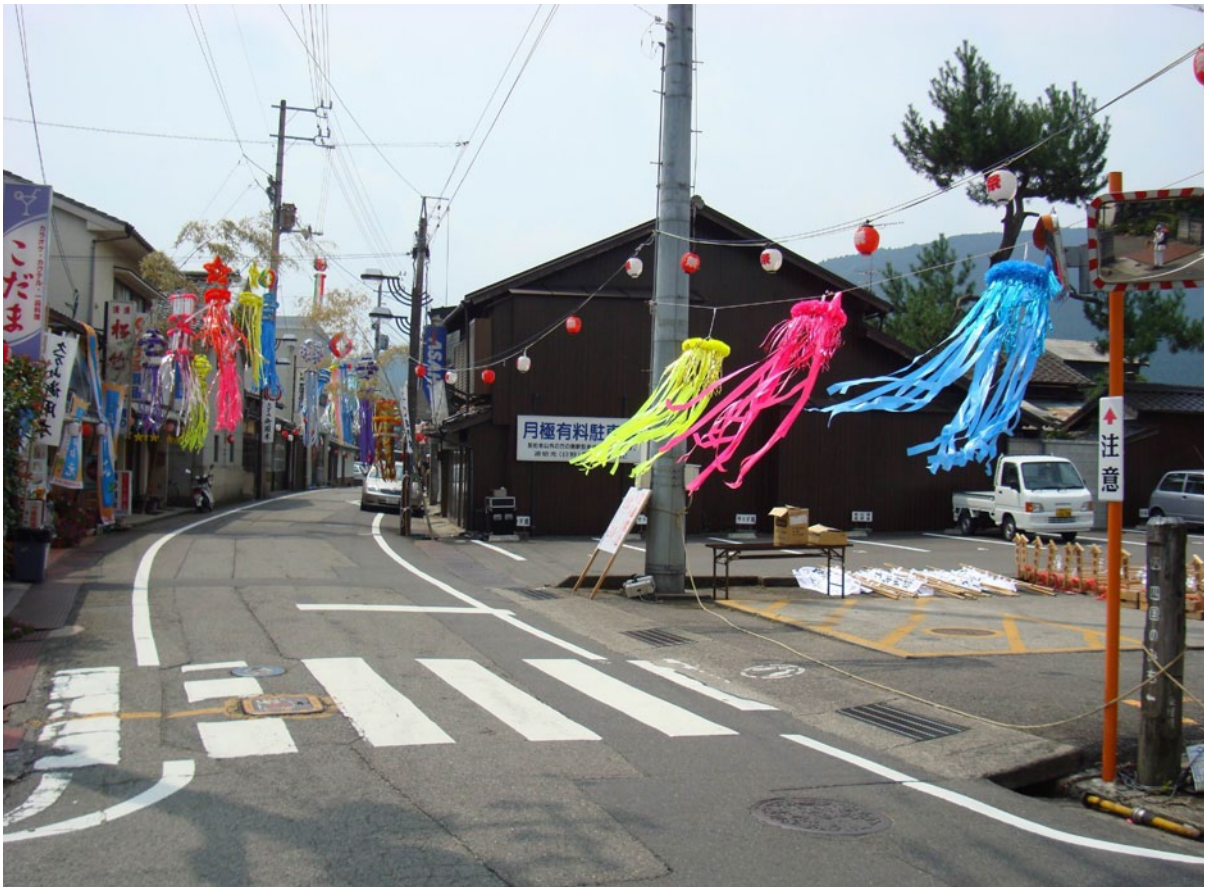
This world on the other shore became conflated with the world of the spirits of the deceased. On *higan* days it is easier to contact this other world than on ordinary days and such a day is thus more suited to pay respect to the spirits of the dead. The accompanying activities involve family visits to gravesites and the upkeep of the site, sutra-readings by priests before the grave-monument or before the ancestor altar at home etc.

Even more important for the contacts between the family and the spirits of the deceased is the period of Obon in which the ancestors actually return to the main family residence. Ritual participation is at its height during this period. Obon's central position in the ritual calendar is reflected in the large number of accompanying festivities, which makes Obon a pivotal period for social and cultural relationships as well. The rituals of Obon firmly fix ancestor relationships in society and the prevailing world-view.



Haka *at the time of Obon*

For the temples and the priests Obon constitutes one of the busiest periods of the year, while for those returning to their family homes from far off places it means endless traffic jams. The spirits are invited by placing lanterns (*tōrō*) at the entrance of the family residence and the grave-monuments are decorated. The family members gather at the ancestral home where the ancestor-altar is kept, visit the grave-monuments and enjoy parties at home. In the community, festivities are organised and the spirits may be entertained by communal dancing (*bon-odori*).



Festive mood during Obon

4. The family

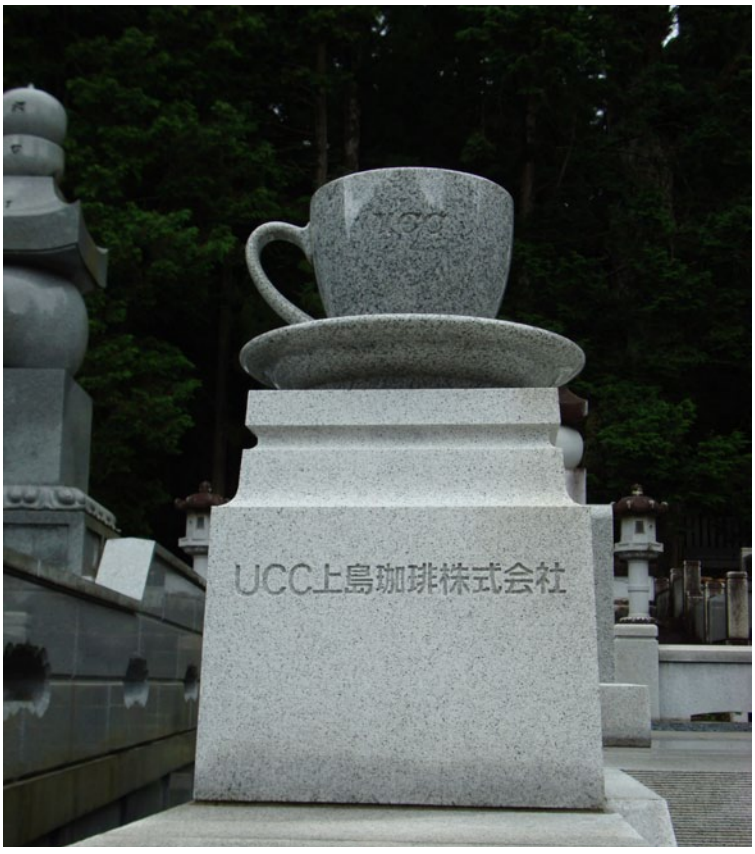
The individual family, on the other hand, entertains more personalized contacts with the deceased, often on a daily basis. The head of the household, the eldest son, counts among his responsibilities the upkeep and continued ritual attendance to the *butsudan*, the ancestor altar, from which (exalted) place the deceased (*hotoke*) partakes of family life. He/she may be spoken to, presented with gifts and receives all kinds of attentions. Whether this attention is a product of fear for the consequences brought on by angry spirits or a token of respect and gratitude is a discussion I will not enter at this place.

The daily observances of flower offering and incense burning are combined with grave-visits on birthdays, the *higan* days and during Obon. Attention is relocated to the temple-hall for specific commemoration days (*kaiki*). These *kaiki* rituals for commemoration, sometimes called ancestor veneration, take the form of *hōyō*, Buddhist services carried out by the religious expert in the ancestor temple, the Bodaiji. In combination these services form a schedule in which ritual guidance is given to the deceased on the path he follows in the afterlife. The first of these *hōyō* takes place seven days after the demise, and is followed by rituals at intervals of two and three weeks and so on. The remembrance ceremony held one year after the actual death is one of the more important, but gradually attendance may decrease for the following rituals in the third and seventh years or in the thirty-third year. Although there are differences among the Buddhist schools, the best-known schedule is that of thirteen commemoration moments with each of the services devoted to one of thirteen "Buddha's" in an ascending order related

to insight, starting with Fudō myōō and ending with the thirteenth step in the thirty-third *kaiki* connected to Kokūzō Bosatsu. The basic aim of the ritual is to solicit the guidance of the thirteen Buddhist figures for the spirit in the afterlife.

5. *Hatsubon*

Within this framework of funeral rituals, possible contact moments, and commemoration days, the *hatsubon* observances are most important socially and religiously. The *hatsubon* refers to the first Obon festival after the dead of the family-member. In some communities the observances held resemble the memorial service, although this time without cremation. As with the *kokubetsu-shiki*, the saying farewell service before the actual cremation, family and friends gather, in rural Japan on a large scale. The spirit of the deceased is send off to the other shore in a specially constructed float in the form of a ship on wheels, the *shōryō-bune*, which is decked with lanterns and personal items of the deceased. After the initial gathering at home the ship is pulled through the streets, stopping at places familiar to the deceased to say farewell, and preceded by acquaintances who throw fireworks around to frighten bad influences. In the end, a Buddhist priest chants sutras such as the *Kannon-gyō* before the ship is put to sea (*nagashi*) and send on its way to the other shore. Nowadays, this has become a symbolic act and the ship is left at the quay for the garbage truck to collect, but the intention is clear. Meanwhile, the bereaved family observes a number of rites during the first year after the death, while outsiders, those who are aware of the death, keep the taboos involved, such as refraining to wish the bereaved a happy new year (*omedetō gozaimasu*). Such well-wishing is considered inappropriate.



Haka *of the founder of UCC Coffee*

6. Re-creation

Within this complex of rituals the tasks of the Buddhist priests and the temple is twofold. It is evident that the care of the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife is entrusted to them as experts in this matter. Further, they have the task of re-creating the physical presence of the deceased as a focus for ritual action by the bereaved. As I discussed, this task translates in a number of actions, starting with the fabrication of the *ihai* (memorial tablet) in which the spirit may take up residence and the construction of the *haka* (grave-monument). Both carry the new posthumous name attributed by the priest. The *ihai* and *haka* may vary in form depending on the Buddhist school, but the net result is the reconstruction of the physical body of the deceased in a perfect form. The *haka* often are constructed from five geometrical forms corresponding to the building stones of the material world, and they carry the *shittan* signs used in Buddhism to refer to the ideal world. The form of the *haka* may also refer to personal qualities or activities of the deceased.

The ashes and bones placed in the urn display the same idea of re-building the body. After cremation the remains of the body, including the bones, are lifted by means of chopsticks from among the ashes. The fragments from the lowest part of the body are taken up first and placed in the urn. Moving upwards in the order of the build-up of the body, the pieces are placed in the urn. This urn is then placed inside the *haka*. By these reconstruction efforts the *ihai* as re-created body becomes the material focal point for ritual at home, while the *haka* contains the same body near the temple or the last resting-place.

7. Immaterial damage

The *tsunami* in north-east Japan not only destroyed infrastructure and the social fabric, but also damaged the ritual system, adding to the feelings of loss, and creating seemingly unsolvable problems. Leaving the problems of the evacuation sites of Fukushima aside, we know that many *bochi* were destroyed and that grave-monuments were tumbled over by the earthquake or *tsunami*. At numerous places nothing could be salvaged because nothing remained. The focal point of *haka-mairi*, the grave-visits, disappeared. In many cases the family-temples, mostly nearby the grave-monuments, also were severely damaged and incapable of performing their tasks as ancestor temples. The other focal point, the *butsudan* with its *ihai*, was also destroyed with the houses that contained them. Thus, the material damage done by the disasters did not only hurt the living but the dead as well because it touched upon the physical manifestations of their world. For the living, the focal points of their ritual reality were taken away, creating insecurities that transcend the basic needs for means of subsistence. The direst consequence in this abstract disaster is that accepted responsibilities felt towards the progenitors and deceased members of the family cannot be shouldered and that the expressions of respect due to "those that were before" cannot be carried out.

The first actions of government-organisations, NGOs and Buddhist temples in the aftermath were to secure the "lifelines", water, food, heating etc. Temples provided temporary lodging to the homeless and played their own part in relief efforts, depending on temple and priest. Their added responsibility was to restore the ritual system that entertains the contacts between living and dead, especially in a situation in which so many had died or gone missing. Erecting gravestones that had tumbled over in the earthquake was one of the most visible actions. One television program showed a Buddhist priest who, dressed in white anti-radiation suit, was allowed to enter the forbidden zones around the nuclear reactor of Fukushima to

salvage his ritual implements and memorial tablets from his temple in the no-entrance zone. The problem became most acute at the *hatsubon* period, in the middle of august. So many persons had died that priests had a hard time battling with the workload. In addition, other problems arose. The yearly ritual performed for spirits that had no ritual connection with the living, the *segaki*-ritual, had to be extended to a greater number of dead and missing people. One reason is that whole families had perished. A second reason is that more than five thousand people were still unaccounted for at that time. A third reason is that many orphans were not capable of performing the ritual duties of the householder.

Presumably washed out to sea by the *tsunami*, the bodily remains of many people had not been recovered. This created both a ritual problem for the temples, and anxiety for the survivors. Among testimonies about the hardships such as living in community-centres, the destruction of their environment and the "lifelines", electricity, water-supply and so on, mention is made of one specific dilemma that cannot be solved. On the one hand people are aware of their ritual duties towards the dead, often part of the mourning process, but as no bodily remains were found, they had no certainty or proof that family members had actually died. To perform the rituals for someone who might still be alive would constitute a breach of etiquette and even rudeness towards the older family-member.

Against the background of the ritual system, which organizes the contact and interaction with the spirits of the dead, the scale of the mental damage can to a certain extant be assessed. The disasters did not only inflict much material damage but because the ritual system has its focal points in concrete things linked to the spirits, the earthquake and *tsunami* also affected the basis of this ritual system. On the one hand the focal points of physical recreation were destroyed while the possibility to rebuild the newly deceased was severely limited by the absence of bodily remains. With the momentary collapse of the ritual system, the foundations of a world-view were undermined, which lead to mental insecurities of the people and instability of the social and cultural fabric with which it was intertwined.

8. Restoring the ritual system

In order to erect the ritual system anew, the first task for the priests was to re-erect the material focal points as a way to alleviate the anxieties and loss of the people they are serving. A subsidiary task was, and still is, to take away anxieties about the state the spirits of the diseased are in, given in by fear of wrathful spirits, spirits that had received insufficient ritual attention. This became most visible this summer at the time of *hatsubon*. Even before this period media-reports showed devastated areas with a flower-shop as one of the first shops to re-open, since flowers were offered to the dead or missing. The same florist also functioned as a communal point of comfort for the living because people could express their feelings of loss. Buddhist temples needed to restore the semblance of ritual normality as soon as possible. One way to go about this is through the material forms that underpin the world-view of the populace. Another way is to cater to the ritual need of the people. Both these courses provide comfort and stress-relief, as is indicated in some reports. In this process a reappraisal of Buddhism is mentioned by younger people, who evidently have become aware of the functions of the Buddhist ritualists or see them in a different light. The responsibility for the rituals is usually with the head of the household and younger people rarely meet the ritual specialists. In these changed circumstances the interaction between the temples and the population has broadened to include younger generations who now for the first time become aware of other aspects of the ritual system they live in, before their time as it were. There are reports that attitudes of

indifference have changed to a more positive one. Unfortunately, I am not in a position to verify whether these reports represent the opinions of a minority or voice what is a more common insight or change of attitude. What is clear is that remarks are heard that in this time of crisis Buddhism or rather local temples are valued for their role of providing mental support.

9. Ritual conclusion

On September 11th Buddhist priests from six prefectures gathered near the Kongōji in a town in Iwate-prefecture to carry out a large-scale outdoor fire ritual (*saitō-goma*). Around 140 parishioners of this temple perished in the *tsunami*. The fuel for this fire-ritual was provided by pine-trees from stretches of land that had been affected by the *tsunami*. The aim of the ritual was twofold, on the one hand to "pray" for the reconstruction efforts and, on the other hand, to pacify the spirits of the dead (*iryō*). From the commentaries of the attending public it becomes clear that this commemoration ritual provided comfort for those present as well.

For the actual ceremony on September 11th see:

http://sankei.jp.msn.com/affairs/photos/110911/dst11091121290019-p1.htm

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36gAoCt9Sww

Hendrik van der Veere (1954) studied Indology and Japano1ogy at Leiden University, specializing in Buddhist Studies. After doing research in Japan at Taishō Daigaku (Tōkyō), he wrote his dissertation on the Shingon monk Kakuban (1095-1144) and took his Ph.D. in Leiden. In connection with his research he became a fully initiated priest of the Shingon School, which allowed him to take advanced initiations and qualifications, and also a certified pilgrims' guide (sendatsu) for the Shikoku pilgrimage. He is employed at Leiden University, where he teaches and conducts his research. His present interest is in three research problems: 1. a broad investigation of systems of knowledge and transmissions of lore within Japanese Buddhism; 2. research of (esoteric) ritual in its workings and exegesis; 3. patterns of pilgrimage and the place of pilgrimage within Japanese culture.